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## EPA Environmental News

### Oil Spill in Salt Marsh Threatens the Web of Life

by Bradley Campbell  
EPA Regional Administrator

The oil-fouled shores of the Patuxent River provide a poignant and timely reminder of the environmental challenges before us as we approach the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Earth Day. Those challenges reflect both our better understanding of nature's fragility, and the urgent need for a renewal of our public commitment to environmental protection.

Sadly, the images of the oil spill are all too familiar: oil-covered birds struggling for life and rows of fish belly-up on inky shorelines. The visual impact of these images is reinforced, not diminished, by our increased understanding of complex ecosystems like the Chesapeake Bay and the insidious long-term effects that oil spills can have on the very web of life.

Although emergency workers are attempting to clean the 111,000 gallons of oil and kerosene that leaked from a burst pipeline serving a PEPCO facility near Swanson Creek, storm winds and tidal action -- combined with PEPCO missteps -- pushed the oil into the Patuxent and tributary marshes and creeks. Three mute swans and 32 wild ducks were rescued. Twelve muskrats, two otters and many fish have died. Even if the spill had been contained, the initial impact included near complete destruction of an entire 45-acre salt marsh.

These are losses that Maryland, which has lost 90 percent of its historical wetlands, can ill-afford. Just as worrisome are the subtler and long-term impacts. Millions upon millions of microscopic creatures and plants -- submerged aquatic grasses, insect larvae, marsh snails, fiddler crabs, tiny shrimp-like amphipods and mummichugs -- live in the salt marshes, creeks and shorelines along the Patuxent. They form the base of the food chain for higher crustaceans, fish and birds. When you kill or poison the base of the chain, the damage spreads across the rest of the links, eventually even to man.

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Pipeline oil spills are not the only threat. Experts believe that more oil enters our streams, lakes, and bays every year from polluted runoff from city streets and storm sewers than from tanker and pipeline accidents. Disappearing habitat, urban sprawl, and the threat of global climate change present new challenges and threaten to erode a generation of progress since the first Earth Day in protecting our air, lands and waters.

These new, long-term challenges, and more immediate ones like the PEPCO spill, highlight the importance of honoring this Earth Day by renewing our public commitment to strengthened environmental protection. Vice President Gore's announcement this week of the Administration's proposal for tighter pipeline safety regulation is one of many proposals that should be part of this renewed commitment. Another is EPA's initiative to update Clean Water Act requirements to ensure that pollution loadings are reduced, that polluted runoff is addressed, and that impaired waters be restored to health across the country.

So, too, should the Clinton Administration's proposals for Better America Bonds, which would provide more than \$10 billion in new resources for state and local governments to protect open space, restore clean water, and revitalize old industrial sites left behind by a changing economy. At the state level, the loss of a major marsh along the Patuxent highlights the importance of Governor Glendening's proposal to restore more than 60,000 acres of Maryland's wetlands lost since World War II.

Sadly, such proposals for strengthened environmental protection have consistently languished under the current congressional leadership. The most recent major debate of environmental significance was over a so-called "property rights" bill that would actually undermine the ability of state and local governments to manage growth and control the adverse impacts of development.

Earth Day is an occasion to demand a change in the debate, one that honors a renewed public commitment to strengthened environmental protection. The oily shores of the Patuxent remind us that there are resources across the country that demand this commitment.

*Bradley Campbell is the EPA Regional Administrator for the mid-Atlantic states, including Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia and the District of Columbia.*

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